

TOWN OF ABINGTON

FY 2012 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Introduction

Abington is a community rich in history, from its 17th century origins as an agrarian community to its 19th century development as an industrial center for shoe manufacturing. When officially incorporated as a town in 1712, Abington encompassed a broad area south of Boston, including what are now the towns of Rockland (incorporated 1874) and Whitman (incorporated as the Town of South Abington in 1875). As its manufacturing base declined after the Depression, Abington began its transformation into a bedroom community, attracting commuters who took advantage of the town's proximity to major highways and railroad service to Boston.

As the town prepares to celebrate its 300th anniversary in 2012, Abington's heritage is evident throughout the community in its remaining open landscapes and its distinctive Colonial-era homes, nineteenth century mill buildings and associated workers' cottages, and mid-twentieth century post-war homes. The town's two major waterways; the Shumatuscancant River to the west which provides the town's border with Brockton, and the Beaver Brook, which runs through the eastern part of town and once provided water power used by the shoe factories, still provide scenic vistas and important environmental resources. Ames Nowell State Park, a large forested conservation parcel, is located in the northwestern corner of town.

At 10.2 square miles, Abington is the fourth-smallest town (behind Hull, Whitman and Rockland) in Plymouth County. The town is bisected by several state roadways (Routes 58, 123, and 139) and adjacent to Route 3, a major access route to Boston. Abington is also serviced by two stations on the Old Colony Line of the Commuter Rail system. Like most suburban towns, Abington is predominantly a community of single-family detached houses, although one third of the town's housing stock is in attached or two-family houses or in multi-unit structures. Commercial districts in North Abington Center and Abington Center, as well as isolated commercial plazas located along major roadways, provide retail and service opportunities for both residents and regional customers. Abington also contains a portion of the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station, which is poised for redevelopment.

With a population of almost 16,000, Abington is a family-oriented community that seeks to provide resources for its residents, both young and old. Much of its population is centered on the eastern side of town, closer to the town's original geographic center. According to the 2010 census, Abington's demographics are shifting, with an increasing number of residents age 60 and older (a 20.5% increase from 2000).

Community Development Strategy

Abington's Community Development Strategy consists of the following four parts:

- **Major Strategies** – Economic Development, Public Infrastructure and Community Facilities, Social Services, and Housing;
- **Key Elements of CDS Implementation** – Community Outreach and Participation and the Community Development Target Area;
- **Relationship to the Commonwealth's Sustainable Development Principles;** and
- **Priority List for Projects/Activities** with a projected timeline to guide the Town in the implementation of the CDS.

Part I Major Strategies

To identify the Major Strategies for its CDS, the town reviewed its previous planning documents, which were completed under the direction of the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board, the Zoning Board, the Conservation Commission, and the Old Colony Planning Council. Over the past decade, these planning activities have included:

- ◆ A Master Plan Update in 2009;
- ◆ An Open Space and Recreation Plan in 2007;
- ◆ Final Report and Recommendation Grade 5-8 Middle School Site Selection Study in 2006;
- ◆ A Community Development Plan in 2004;
- ◆ A Long Range Plan for School Facilities in 2004; and
- ◆ An Affordable Housing Strategy in 2003.

Abington's comprehensive 2009 Master Plan Update addresses all planning elements required by M.G.L. C.41, S.81D - Land Use, Housing, Economic Development, Transportation, Open Space and Recreation, Historic and Cultural Resources, and Community Facilities and establishes an overall community development goal:

To manage and guide development in the Town of Abington so that new development will have a positive impact on the tax base; preserve and protect the town's character and amenities; accommodate needed housing and employment opportunities; provide for commercial and business growth; and meet other community development needs.

The Town's 2007 Open Space and Recreation Plan update, which is consistent with EOE's Division of Conservation Services (DCS) guidelines, focuses on water policy, natural resources, recreational amenities, and open space, while its E.O. 418 Community Development Plan (2004) examines Abington's housing and economic development needs. Taken together, Abington's Master Plan, OSR Plan and CD Plan form the basis for the Town's 2012 CDS. The following Major Strategies synthesize key goals from each of these plans.

Housing

Abington's housing objective is to provide an adequate supply and range of housing types and costs to meet the needs and income levels of diverse individuals and families in the community. The town seeks to accomplish this objective through the expansion of both market rate and assisted low and moderate cost housing opportunities in the community. A 2009 Master Plan goal to encourage the preservation, improvement, and development of housing to provide a balance of local housing opportunities for all citizens guided the town's interest in developing a housing rehabilitation program. Rehabilitating housing that is in poor condition allows Abington residents to afford to remain in their homes and maintain them for years to come. Pursuing this strategy is particularly important in Abington, which has an older housing stock (35% of units constructed before 1959) and a significant population (33%) of low- and moderate-income homeowners who pay more for housing than they can afford. While Abington's LMI population is lower than some of its neighbors, the town continues to have a high rate of unemployment (7.4% in October 2011), which exceeds the state average (6.8%) and places an even greater burden on residents' ability to afford basic housing costs. The Town's high incidence of homeowner housing cost burden underscores the need for subsidized housing rehabilitation: these families cannot absorb the additional cost of extraordinary maintenance and repairs.

A second housing strategy is to revise the town's existing zoning bylaw to encourage housing that fits with the town's expressed vision and goals. Abington amended its zoning bylaw to create two new zoning districts, a Central Business District (CBD) at Abington Center and North Abington Center and a Transit Oriented District (TOD) at the new commuter rail station on Central Avenue (Rte. 123). Both districts encourage mixed-use development, including a range of housing types and densities, while promoting economic development. Within the TOD, a private developer constructed 192 units of affordable rental housing at the Woodlands at Abington Station. Other affordable housing developments include seven affordable units at the 28-unit Meadow Brook subdivision. In addition, the 2009 Master Plan recommended a review of the zoning bylaw to identify potential revisions that would encourage the development of a variety of housing to be constructed in abandoned and/or vacant industrial properties.

The town will continue to encourage new housing developments on parcels that correspond with specific established criteria and characteristics: without major environmental constraints, including floodplains, groundwater recharge areas, wetlands, and other sensitive environmental areas; near but not on major roads for ease of access to any future public transportation; proximity to present or proposed long-term open space and potential walking trails; within convenient walking distance of shopping areas, public services, and institutions; and compatibility with adjacent land uses.

Economic Development

Abington's Master Plan examines several economic development needs and identifies opportunities to address them. Through its Economic Development Program, the Town of Abington seeks to retain and attract business, maximize local job creation and retention, and increase local tax revenues through the use of the Economic Development Incentive Program (EDIP). The Commonwealth of Massachusetts designated Abington an Economic Target Area (ETA), allowing the town to offer tax incentives to prospective new firms and employers who locate in the community under the EDIP. The additional funding that is generated as a result of the Town's Economic Development Program is expected to be used to address the Community's priorities in the next five years and would complement any CDBG funds that become available.

To increase and diversify its commercial tax base, Abington will continue its efforts to attract new retail, office, light manufacturing, and warehouse development while retaining existing businesses. The town will seek to concentrate future commercial development in order to increase convenience, minimize auto trips, provide opportunity for walking and bicycling to destinations, and protect existing neighborhoods from the intrusion of incompatible uses. The most suitable areas for complementary mixed-use development are Abington and North Abington centers, which combine residential, retail, service, public, and light industrial uses and contain under-used land. To attract prospective firms and entrepreneurs to utilize vacant and abandoned buildings, the town has created an inventory of available commercial and industrial properties in the community. Abington will also continue to evaluate potential economic development opportunities from the development of Southfield on the site of the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station. The town's Master Plan recommends the development of an access road from Route 18 to industrial land in the former Air Station to encourage redevelopment potential. A second strategy will be to work with existing businesses in the community that want to expand or increase their business to overcome impediments and enhance local tax revenues.

The designation of the Central Business District zones in Abington Center and North Abington will allow more intense development and support convenience shopping and consumer services in these districts. In addition to efforts to improve traffic safety, efforts to create a more pleasant and attractive pedestrian environment through sidewalk improvements and the installation of street trees and furniture

is also important. The Town recently completed a Public Works Economic Development Grant funded streetscape project in the North Abington Business District.

Abington will look to fund economic development endeavors from multiple sources such as CDBG, CDAG, Urban Renewal, MassDevelopment, LISC, Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, PWED, and other public programs.

Social Services

Abington's social service strategy focuses on the needs of its youth, families, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities. One of the top priorities is to ensure that local youth receive a superior education. The town has demonstrated this commitment through its annual budget appropriations to the schools and through facility improvements. The School Department commissioned a Long Range Master Plan for School Facilities to evaluate existing conditions and identify options to address current deficiencies and future needs. Recent efforts have focused on the need to construct a new middle School. A study committee was formed to identify a suitable site for the facility. Ultimately, the committee selected a 60+ acre town-owned parcel on Plymouth Street (Route 58).

In addition to the commitment made to its youth, Abington offers many critical social service programs for its elderly residents through its Council on Aging (COA). Abington's seniors (age 60 or older) represent more than 17.5% of the town's population and addressing their specific needs have long been a priority for the town. Since relocating to its new facility in 2008 (see below), the COA has significantly expanded its programming, now offering more than 14 programs and activities, including transportation, outreach, nutrition and health, and enrichment programs and assisting more than 160 individuals each week.

Abington is also responding to the needs of its residents struggling in an economic downturn. At 7.4% unemployment, the town's average continues to exceed that of the state. The high number (33%) of low- and moderate-income homeowners who pay more for housing than they can afford is also a concern. Assisting local and regional agencies who provide fuel and food services to residents in need is an important goal for the community.

Public Infrastructure, Community Facilities, and Services

Abington seeks to provide efficient and effective local government services and programs, maintain its high quality level of education, improve its existing infrastructure and facilities, and provide facilities and services to meet emergency management and public safety needs of the community.

As the town's population has grown, it has placed increasing demands on local government to maintain current level of service or provide additional services. The Town has made significant investments in upgrading or providing new and improved community facilities. Since 2004, the Town has addressed several needs identified in its CDS: 1) the development of a new Senior Center; 2) construction of a new Police Station; and 3) improvements to the town's water and sewer systems.

In 2007, Town acquired a 13,544 square foot single-story former church building for use as the Abington Senior Center. The town also recently completed a new 16,000 square foot Police Station on the site of the former station on Central Street. It is anticipated that this new facility will serve the long-term needs of the town for the foreseeable future. However, several needs still exist, including the need to upgrade the town's existing two fire stations or construct a new centrally-located facility. Abington recently commissioned a study to review this issue. Other needs identified by the town include improvements to Island Grove Park and Memorial Field and construction of a new Middle School.

The challenge for accomplishing future objectives will be to manage the limited financial resources available to the town to gain the maximum impact with the funding available. To address its facility needs, the Town can pursue additional funding options such as MPPF, EDA, RRD, SBAB, CDBG, and various public safety grants.

Part II Key Elements of CDS Implementation

Community Outreach and Participation

The Town of Abington is committed to an inclusive decision-making process that seeks consensus from stakeholders and residents. The Board of Selectmen has traditionally led community planning initiatives in Abington. Some or all of Abington's volunteer boards, including the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission, and Public Works, as well as municipal staff, often participate in the planning process. As necessary, the Board of Selectmen uses local appropriations to purchase professional assistance and collaborates with the Old Colony Planning Commission to help community members realize their planning goals and objectives.

The town held two public forums on November 14th to discuss and update its CDS; the first meeting was held at the Senior Center at 11:00 am and the second meeting was held at 7:00 pm at the Town Hall. These sessions were advertised by posting notices in Town Hall, the Senior Center, the Library and on the Town's website. The CDS was also discussed with the Board of Selectmen at an advertised public hearing on Monday, November 28, 2011 in preparation for this grant application. The last CDS prepared by the town (2004) was supplied to the Board prior to the meeting and was available to those attending the public hearing. At that time, the Board reviewed the town's CDS and discussed more current challenges the town is now facing. At the final CDS meeting on December 12, 2011, the Board of Selectmen voted to amend and approve the CDS for submission as part of the Town's FY 2012 Community Development Fund II application.

Community Development Target Areas

The Town of Abington has identified two target areas for its community development efforts. The North Abington Target Area is defined as follows: extends north to the border of Weymouth, to the east to the border of Rockland, to the south to the end of Charles Street to Plymouth Street to Adams Street, and to the west along Washington Street (Route 18). Both sides of Washington Street, Adams Street, and Plymouth Street are considered to be in the target area. The target area contains two complete census block groups (Census Tract 5202.01, Block Groups 1 & 2) and a portion of third (Census Tract 5201, Block Group 1). This target area was selected for several reasons – it contains a high percentage of pre-1959 housing stock, it is home to a high percentage of LMI households, it encompasses the North Abington Central Business District, it includes Abington's portion of the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station, and it represents the most densely populated area of town. (See Attachment – Abington HUD LMI Population Map)

The South Abington Target Area is defined as follows: extends north to Groveland Street, west to Washington Street, south to the Whitman town line, and east to Beaver Brook/Brockton town line. The target area contains one complete census tract and a portion of a second (Census Tract 5201, Block Group 4 and part of Census Tract 5201, Block Group 3). This area includes a mid-twentieth century neighborhood of small ranch-style homes in varying stages of upkeep. While some alterations have occurred on these 60 year old homes, there are a significant number of structures with visible deficiencies and deterioration. The area also includes a variety of strip developments along the Route 123 corridor, many of which are underutilized.

Part III *Community Development Strategy's Relationship to the Commonwealth's Sustainable Development Principles*

Abington's CDS emphasizes *concentrating development and mixed uses*, which is why part of the focus is on the Abington Center Central Business District (CDB) and the community's older neighborhoods. The focus of the two target areas is also consistent with *advancing equity*, which will result in reducing the disparity among lower income residents in the Abington Center and the rest of the town. It will *expand housing opportunities* by promoting the rehabilitation of existing units, and returning vacant housing and former industrial buildings to productive use. The CDS will also help preserve the diversity of Abington's housing stock as it is well suited to a variety of types of households. In addition, the CDS will improve *transportation choice*, by encouraging the rehabilitation of public infrastructure, making it possible for walkers, bikers, and those with mobility impairments to have safe access to modes of transportation other than the auto. The town will *protect land and ecosystems* by reviewing land development proposals in light of existing road systems. The CDS also recommends strategies for *using natural resources wisely*, and promotes *protecting land and ecosystems* through the development of parks and recreation areas and the preservation of open space. The CDS will help the Town make *efficient decisions* because it is consistent with locally developed plans, including the Master Plan Update, Open Space and Recreation Plan, and Community Development Plan.

Part IV *Community Development Priorities*

List of Prioritized Projects/Activities:

1. Complete improvements to the North Abington and Abington Center Business Districts to make these areas more attractive and pedestrian friendly. Utilize a variety and mix of financing sources, including private funding, Urban Renewal, MassDevelopment, LISC, PWED, CDAG, CDBG, and other public grants.
2. Work with the Old Colony Planning council to identify, lay-out, and develop bicycle and pedestrian routes, including routes that will connect the town's recreational assets.
3. Address the town's facility needs, including improvements to the town's Fire Stations and construction of a new Middle School.
4. Foster appropriate new growth in the town's retail and service sector in areas with adequate existing infrastructure to expand the town's tax and job bases.
5. Rehabilitate and preserve existing housing stock affordable to low- and moderate-income households.
6. Create a financing plan to meet the Town's unfunded pension and health care liabilities.
7. Review the town's zoning bylaw to identify potential revisions that would encourage the development of a variety of housing to be constructed in abandoned and/or vacant industrial properties.
8. Expand the outreach services of the Council on Aging to identify and assist the Town's neediest segment of the elderly and/or disabled population.
9. Increase conservation land through acquisition and conservation restrictions, including the Porhecky Property, which town meeting authorized as an open space land acquisition.
10. Prioritize neighborhoods with aging infrastructure, poor drainage, a lack of sidewalks or inaccessible sidewalks for improvements including full depth roadway construction.
11. Identify additional funding sources for local and regional agencies that provide fuel and food services to residents in need.
12. Continue to pursue opportunities to preserve the town-owned Griffin Dairy Property, a 34.4 acre property adjacent to 9.8 acres of privately-owned fields and woods to the south.